

The following is a slightly edited version of a posting on PubLib on Wednesday, June 11, 2008.

The Fanwood Memorial Library (NJ) and the Scotch Plains Public Library (NJ) have, over the past 3 years, forged a unique shared services partnership.

"Libraries and Autism: We're Connected" is a customer service training video to help library staff serve individuals with autism and their families more effectively and inclusively. The video focuses on what you need to know about autism spectrum disorder and empowers the viewer with specific techniques to offer more inclusive and comprehensive customer service when interacting with this growing and underserved population. Nationally, autism affects one in every 150 individuals, and in New Jersey, as many as one in ninety-four.

As the project evolved, it became clear a website would be the best way to share and disseminate the depth and variety of valuable information and tools that were created. One goal was to create a replicable model and as such, all libraries and other organizations are encouraged to explore the site www.thejointlibrary.org/autism, watch the video and make free use of all of the support resources available there. Please let us know what you think, link to our site, take our survey and help spread the word about this groundbreaking project.

An additional benefit was the realization that the basic customer services skills and techniques provided can serve as universal models for best-practices library service to all members of the public. It also became clear that these service tips and strategies can be successfully utilized, with little or no modification, by any group dealing with the general public, and where interaction with members of the autism community may occur such as healthcare facilities, restaurants, or retail outlets.

The video was created by the two libraries as a part of the "Welcoming Library Spaces for the Autism Community and Their Families" incubator project, which was made possible by a contract with Infolink: The Eastern New Jersey Regional Library Cooperative. The Cooperative and its services are funded by the New Jersey State Library, which is responsible for the coordination, promotion and funding of the New Jersey Library Network. This was one of six successful projects funded to meet the strategic need for libraries to provide services in proactive and creative ways to children and adults diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and their families.

Our goal is to spread the word as widely as possible - and we'd be more than happy to speak with anyone to provide more detail or additional information about the project or how to approach more in-depth training and so on. It's had a tremendously positive impact on our own staff and we know it has the potential to do likewise for others.

For more information about this project and to receive a free "Libraries and Autism: We're Connected" decal for your library, please contact the libraries off-list at autism@thejointlibrary.org

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